

MA THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

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PRESS RELEASE

June 20, 1986

ALVIN LANGDON COBURN: A RETROSPECTIVE
July 23-August 31, 1986

Alvin Langdon Coburn: A Retrospective, which opens on July 23 at The Cleveland Museum of Art, presents 100 photographs selected from more than 800 that Coburn (1882-1966) bequeathed to the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester. The exhibition was organized by and is circulated under the auspices of Eastman House to acquaint a wide audience with the work of one of America's most distinctive photographers.

Coburn first started taking pictures with a 4 x 5-inch Kodak when he was eight. His earliest serious encouragement came from F. Holland Day, a distant relative and professional photographer who, when Coburn and his mother were on extended holiday in London, in 1899, included nine of Coburn's images in a show he organized for the Royal Photographic Society and introduced him to the twenty-one-year-old Edward Steichen. Soon after returning from Europe in 1901, Coburn opened a studio in New York City near Steichen's studio at 291 Fifth Avenue, which in 1905 became Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secession Gallery. Elected to the Photo-Secession group in late 1902, and in 1903 to the Linked Ring ("The Brotherhood"), a group based in London, Coburn was at age twenty-one a member of the two most important international groups promoting the recognition of photography as an art. Influential figures in Coburn's life at this time were Stieglitz and photographer/teacher Gertrude Kasebier, who probably

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encouraged him to attend Arthur Wesley Dow's summer school in Ipswich, Massachusetts, where he acquired an abiding interest in Japanese esthetics. Perhaps because Coburn was so young, only seven years old, when his father died, he was all his life under the influence of, as she was described in an issue of Camera Work (1908), "his wonderfully ambitious and self-sacrificing mother." Coburn ruefully noted in his biography that "it was a battle royal all the days of our life."

If the years 1900 to 1905 were Coburn's "apprentice years," the next five to twelve years, when he made his great contribution to photography, have been called "the Symbolist years." He moved to London in 1904, traveling often to New York to keep up his contacts with the Photo-Secessionists but never really entering the inner circle. In London, he requested prominent English authors and artists to sit for their portraits. George Bernard Shaw, the first author Coburn called on, immediately took to the ingratiating, talented young man (who, despite his ingenuousness, earned the nickname "the Hustler"). With Shaw as his champion, Coburn found doors quickly opened. The remarkable portraits Coburn took of the literary giants and artists of his day --among them G. K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, Henry James, Auguste Rodin, and Shaw (one portrait of him is in the pose of Rodin's "The Thinker")--he later published as Men of Mark and More Men of Mark.

In these portraits, Coburn attempted to unite the spiritual realm with the material. He first immersed himself in books written or owned by his subjects, "to know something of the inner man." During the photography session Coburn liked the sitter to engage in a creative activity, like playing the piano, or reading poetry (his animated portrait of W. B. Yeats is an example of the latter). Coburn would release the camera shutter at a moment of great

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feeling, and the inner man would be captured--"recognized," Coburn called it --luminous and intensely real.

Coburn used his soft-focus lens in the manner of pictorial photographers of his time--not to achieve clarity and ultimate focus, but to approximate human vision. This, coupled with his gum-platinum printing process, heightened the effect of spiritual revelation. The process placed a platinum print coded with gum-bichromate in register beneath the original negative, then re-exposed, developed, and printed the resulting image, which added depth and richness to the shadows of the platinum print and a subtle, two-toned (gray and brown) effect. Coburn's creative approach to gum-platinum printing was one of his special contributions to the art of his time. Another was his skillful use of the time-consuming and exacting photogravure printing process. This mechanical means of reproducing quantities of photographic prints inks a photographically-engraved plate, wipes off the excess ink, lays dampened paper on the plate, and passes it through a copper-plate press. In 1909 Coburn purchased his own photogravure press and produced the plates for London, his first book, and in the next few years, for New York, Men of Mark, and H. G. Wells' The Door in the Wall. Photogravures produced for these books are exhibited in the show alongside hand-produced images, allowing visitors to see them as the fine graphic works of art they were deemed in their own time.

Coburn produced cityscapes of London and New York from 1907 through 1912, in a period when books illustrating the great cities of the world--with or without accompanying text--were much in vogue. These beautiful series and his great Yosemite Valley and Grand Canyon landscapes of late 1911 and January, 1912 were made in a creative burst of excited response to his homeland, ironically, in the few years just before he left, never to return, in 1912.

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In that year Coburn married Edith Clement of Boston, left for a European honeymoon, and photographed only intermittently thereafter. During one month in 1917, he produced some interesting kaleidoscope-like photographs he called Vortographs. He and other artists, and writers such as Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound, were seeking to respond to the modernist movements on the continent.

Always an idealist, and even as a very young man interested in comparative religion, Coburn at this time became committed to freemasonry and the ideals of a group called the Universal Order, which included Rosicrucians, Masons, Druids, and men interested in Eastern religions. His increased devotion to spiritual goals effectively removed him from the competitive world of photography. Between 1928 and 1932 he gave his collection of photographs to the Royal Photography Society, destroyed 15,000 negatives, became a British subject, and moved from London to North Wales, where he lived until his death in 1966. Ninety-three of the 100 images in the exhibition date from the years of his most important work, from 1903 through the Vortographs in 1917; seven date from 1917 until his death.

After Cleveland, the exhibition will travel to the Huntsville Museum of Art (September 28-December 21, 1986); The International Center for Photography, New York (January 16-February 16, 1987); the Lowe Art Gallery, Coral Gables (March 4-April 13, 1987); and the Elvehjem Museum of Art, Madison (May 16-July 5, 1987). In Cleveland, the exhibition is supervised by Tom Hinson, curator of contemporary art, and supported by the Ohio Arts Council.

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For additional information or photographs, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340